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# Carlyle, Arnold, and Wilde: Art and the Departure from Humanism to Aestheticism in the Victorian Era

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Caitlin Larracey is a senior English major with minors in Spanish, GLBT Studies, and History. She

conducted this research as an Honors Contract under the mentorship of Dr. Derek Leuenberger of the English Department. She presented this paper at the Massachusetts Statewide Research Conference at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in Spring 2012. Caitlin intends to apply to several English Ph.D. programs, with a proposed specialty in Shakespeare and Renaissance Literature, and she hopes to attend graduate school in the fall of 2013.

**T**he Victorian era of British literature spanned almost an entire century and saw writers from Carlyle to Rossetti, Kipling to Barrett Browning, and Dickens to Tennyson. The fabric of London changed as industry and invention flourished, along with poverty and social decay. Significant changes in politics, science, and religious thinking emerged as well. As British society moved further away from its roots in agriculture and devout religion, British literature also moved further away from its roots in Renaissance humanism towards the decadence and aestheticism that characterize late nineteenth-century works. By tracing the shift of styles and use of rhetorical devices in Victorian literature, the story of Victorian England and the changes in philosophies emerges.

The transition from humanism to aestheticism was not simple, nor are the two forms completely distinct from each other in practice. Near the beginning of the Victorian era, Thomas Carlyle argued in *Past and Present* (1843) that there is a separation of the individual from the community that only seems to grow; similarly, Victorian literature details the separation of virtue from literature. Matthew Arnold's "Sweetness and Light" from *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) relies on the humanist principles of *imitatio* and the belief that the critic (or poet) should create art that reflects the values of the artist and moves society toward that of a more virtuous one; his own art "The Scholar-Gipsy" (1853) demonstrates these principles. Yet, towards the end of the era, Oscar Wilde seems to abandon humanism completely in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894) in favor of aesthetically pleasing art that may or may not have any purpose beyond its own existence. Through the years in which these authors are writing, the humanist principles slowly dissipate in importance from Carlyle to Wilde as the societal focus shifts from a reaction against the new mechanized society as well as the desire to change it, to an acquiescence to this society of industry and self-interest, and a desire to enjoy what one can experience within this cultural frame.

Sir Philip Sidney explains and demonstrates the major aspects of humanism in *Defence of Poesie*, which is itself a piece of literature that Sidney wrote at the height of British Renaissance humanism, and these principles can inform a humanist reading of Victorian literature. A major feature of humanism is the use of *imitatio* (imitation or Aristotle's *mimesis*). *Imitatio* refers to an author's utilization of classical or influential texts within his or her own new literary

work, and represents the nostalgia for the Golden Age of the past that the Renaissance thinkers sought to create. Sidney demonstrates *imitatio* by basing his defense on Aristotle's principles of art and using them to refute Plato's banishment of poets from *The Republic* (137-9). By using classical sources, Sidney seeks to legitimize his own argument.

Sidney draws upon these classical sources, just as later writers, including Victorian writers, would draw upon Sidney and English Renaissance humanism. Then Sidney adds Horace's axiom of the *Ars Poetica*, that literature's purpose is "*dolere et delectare*," or to instruct and to delight, in order to defend literature as a whole (139). Literature can both instruct and delight because it teaches by example and can move men towards virtue: "Virtue is the most excellent resting place for all worldly learning to make his end of, so poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most princely to move towards it, in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman" (142). The unwritten assumption of Sidney's writing is that it will be the upper class poet, like Sidney himself or Castiglione's courtier, who will teach and delight the masses. The upper class is that which can afford to spend time analyzing ancient literature and writing about it in new works, and is responsible for educating the rest of society. In Renaissance humanism, and the Horatian model of learning, literature can and should have the higher purpose of teaching virtue with the purpose of building a better society, and, secondarily, should do this in an aesthetically pleasing way.

While humanist principles persist in Victorian literature, the Victorian perception of the separation of the individual from the community, as Thomas Carlyle examines, begins to strain this mode of thought. In *Past and Present*, Carlyle crafts the story of the "Irish widow." This widow "went forth with her three children, bare of all resource to solicit help from the Charitable establishments" only to be "refused; referred from one to the other, helped by none" (Carlyle 1079). Because of this refusal, "her strength and heart failed her" (1079). Carlyle comments on the lack of a community in the city that leads to the destruction of the individual's wellbeing. The self-interest that pervades England, due to the growth of industry and capitalism according to Carlyle, is infused into the everyday interactions of English citizens and has broken apart the community. Self-interest is pervasive and destructive, as the fatal illness of the widow leads to the infection of "her Lane with fever, so that 'seventeen other persons' died of fever there in consequence" (1079). The community faces punishment for its abandonment of the individual's health and safety, losing eighteen people when it could have saved one. There is no sense of virtue in this new and growing capitalist society. A society cannot be virtuous if the very fabric of that society, the

relationships between its people, has been torn apart.

Additionally, England's society cannot regain its virtue, according to Carlyle's humanist principles, because there is no longer anyone present to impart virtue to others, whether by way of literature or through politics and business. The upper class, or aristocracy, has reduced itself to "master-idlers" (1076) and "Master Unworkers" (1079) that cannot assist in the growth of society, but only help it to reduce itself to that of the Irish widow. About the unworker of England, Carlyle writes:

Pausing amid his game-preserves, with awful eye, - as well he may! Coercing fifty-pound tenants; coercing, bribing, cajoling; 'doing what he likes with his own.' His mouth full of loud futilities, and arguments to prove the excellence of his Corn-law; and in his heart the blackest misgiving, a desperate half-consciousness that his excellent Corn-law is *indefensible*, that his loud arguments for it are of a kind to strike men too literally *dumb*. (1079)

The upper class of the Victorian era is not only idle in refusing to work at anything productive, but it also does not possess any virtue that it can possibly relate to the rest of society through any means, whether in literature or political action. The aristocrat's words are "futile" and there is no chance that he can use language, the medium that Renaissance thinkers believed to be the most virtuous and honest, to bring improvement to society; he coerces, bribes, and cajoles with words, and he does not instruct or delight. The example that the aristocracy gives the rest of society in abandoning it and drawing itself into its wealth, is one of self-interest that leads to the abandonment of "sisterhood [and] brotherhood" (1082) and the emergence of "Human Chaos" (1083) instead of the virtuous and ordered society that is the goal of Renaissance humanism.

Beyond Carlyle's argument for humanist ideals, his writing itself is humanist in nature. He utilizes *imitatio* in the story of the Irish widow, and he calls on the earlier myth of Midas to explain that England has "less good of [riches] than any nation ever had before" (1079). The English have asked for wealth and some have received it, but this means of wealth generation has only harmed England, just as Midas's wish for gold destroyed him. In this *imitatio*, Carlyle exemplifies what is wrong with English society, just as humanists seek to discover society's weaknesses in order to strengthen it. By illustrating that the widow "sank down in typhus-fever" (1079) and that those who denied her "actually were her brothers" (1080), Carlyle seeks to move the English to outrage, or at least disbelief. He wants them to attach emotion and a story to their learning so that emotion can move them towards change. Additionally, he demands

that the new Captains of Industry move from the “vulturous hunger, for fine wines, valet reputation and gilt carriages” (1084) and take the place of the aristocracy and become the example for the rest of society. He states, “Captains of Industry are the true Fighters, henceforth recognizable as the only true ones: Fighters against Chaos, Necessity, and the Devils and Jötuns; and lead on Mankind in that great, and alone true, and universal warfare” (1084). In this polemic literature, there is a strong resentment of and rage about modern society that fuels Carlyle’s words. Carlyle demands through the use of literature that the English act to make their society more virtuous and beneficial for all its inhabitants.

Nearly three decades later, Matthew Arnold similarly employs the principles of Renaissance humanism in his belief that literature is a tool intended to teach others how to build a virtuous society. In the “Sweetness and Light” section of the piece of social criticism *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold details his vision of culture and what it should be, and since a society is built upon its culture, Arnold also describes what society is and how people can change it. In beginning to define culture, Arnold explains the concept of curiosity in relation to culture as “the disparagers of culture make its motive curiosity” (1595). He states, in regards to curiosity, that “I have before now pointed out that we English do not, like the foreigners, use this word in a good sense as well as in a bad sense. With us, the word is always used in a somewhat disapproving sense” (1595). This negative perception of curiosity is largely due to the Augustine notion of *curiositas*. *Curiositas* refers to a desire for worldly, secular knowledge that distracts people from pursuing divine knowledge. In the Renaissance, figures such as Sidney react against this negative view of secular pursuits with the argument that people can use them to build a better secular society that can subsequently be a more divine society. This pursuit of knowledge has an ethical element that validates it. There is still a resistance against curiosity, however, that persists into the Victorian era for Arnold to address. Like earlier humanists, Arnold spins curiosity in a positive light, stating, “A liberal and intelligent eagerness about the things of the mind may be meant by a foreigner when he speaks of curiosity, but with us the word always conveys a certain notion of frivolous and unedifying activity” (1595). Literature, and the criticism that analyzes it, can be a useful way to explore complex ideas or moral dilemmas. Stange quotes Arnold’s own letters, in which Arnold writes, “More and more I feel bent against the modern English habit (too much encouraged by Wordsworth) of using poetry as a channel for thinking aloud, instead of making anything” (14). Arnold revives more humanist principles and reacts against the Romantic tradition of focusing on the inner mind of the poet, or of the speaker (a technique that Browning often employs), as this may replace the ethical purpose of the

poem. Literature can present solutions or raise questions that can change the way people think of society, and Arnold argues that curiosity and literature need not be something “frivolous” that has no purpose outside of its own existence.

With this humanist purpose in mind, Arnold uses humanist tenets in “Sweetness and Light” as he explains his argument. Like Carlyle, Arnold draws upon previous writers and thinkers, and he builds his work from eclectic source material. Arnold quotes famous political philosopher Montesquieu, the rather unknown Bishop Wilson, and the literary figure Jonathan Swift in this one section of *Culture and Anarchy* alone. Arnold references these sources to elaborate on them and piece them together to find an argument that is relevant and helpful for his own time. The quotation he uses from Montesquieu encapsulates part of the message Arnold desires to express: “The first motive which ought to impel us to study is the desire to augment the excellence of our nature, and to render an intelligent being yet more intelligent” (1595). Arnold accepts this statement and its relation to “genuine scientific passion” and a “worthy ground” (1595), and the necessity of understanding the world and “things as they are, natural and proper in an intelligent being” (1596). Arnold then modifies this belief to acknowledge the aspects of culture that are not “scientific.” He notes that there is another element to humanity that goes beyond the rational faculty, or the intellectual part of the mind, that includes emotions, such as “impulses towards action, help, and beneficence” (1596). Literature can activate such impulses and lead to the wish for “removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it” (1596). Additionally, he states that this world is found in times of “*real* thought and *real* beauty” that are signaled by “flowering times for literature and all the creative power of genius” (1596). This manner of discussing literature recalls the Renaissance principle of creating a more virtuous world by crafting more virtuous individuals through literature.

Yet, Arnold further complicates even this principle by dragging it into the Victorian world, as by itself eras of human existence do not seem to constrain it. He argues that the concept of culture that is pure is the composition of “sweetness and light” (1596), which is the “pursuit of perfection” or a virtuous world. Sweetness and light become Victorian concepts when Arnold places them in opposition to industry and machinery as “he who works for machinery, he who works for hatred, works only for confusion. Culture looks beyond machinery” (1596). This push against machinery is a criticism new to the Victorian age. Arnold further distinguishes his argument from the initial aspects of English Renaissance humanism by relaxing both its strictness in form and content and its social class boundaries.

As Stange argues, “Arnold never tried to reassert any simple form of neo-classicism” (9) and that “a restoration of classical literary principles would simply not be adequate to the needs and experience of the nineteenth-century writer” (10). With a strategy that is itself a kind of *imitatio*, Matthew Arnold uses humanist techniques and the main principle of humanism, and then modifies them to relate to the Victorian era.

This aspect of Arnold’s criticism upholds part of Renaissance form, but, where the Renaissance would require this as a necessity of a humanist piece, Arnold states, “The ordinary popular literature is an example of this way of working on the masses.... Our religious and political organisations give an example of this way of working on the masses. I condemn neither way” (1596). Arnold sees that there is a value to all types and styles of literature, as long as the message behind the literature is there. Both types of literature can be didactic in nature and can serve a purpose in providing a “set of ideas” (1596). Yet, here again he modifies humanist, Horatian principles as he states that “culture works differently” in straight-forward pedantic literature in that it attempts to sell a pre-determined “intellectual food” to the perceived “level of inferior classes” (1596). Where humanist literature in its initial formation would teach only to the upper class with the assumption that nobility would pass on the virtue to the lower classes, Arnold argues that the literature of real culture “seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light” (1596). This is a departure from even Carlyle’s humanism, which holds the upper class, now the captains of industry, responsible for lower class success. Arnold creates an updated version of humanism that fits into the radically different Victorian era.

Arnold’s poetry, such as “The Scholar-Gipsy,” also seeks to exemplify these modified humanist principles. In its premise alone, it recalls humanist *imitatio*, as Arnold writes the poem based upon Joseph Glanvill’s 1661 text, *Vanity of Dogmatizing*, and he also writes in iambic pentameter, which, although certainly not exclusive to Renaissance humanism, was the meter of choice for the time. Stange writes that comparing Arnold’s “principles with his practice ... can lead to dissatisfaction with the poet for not meeting the high requirements of his own critical program” (4-5), but that Arnold’s concern in his criticism is “to define, for his own time, the conditions under which the best poetry could be written. He knew, better than anyone else, that his poems did not fulfill his own criteria” (5). Yet, the importance of Arnold’s own pieces is that they are an attempt to ascend to these high standards. Although “The Scholar-Gipsy” predates “Sweetness and Light” by over a decade, some of the same principles that Arnold delineates in

his criticism appear in his poetry. The virtue that he examines in this poem is the value of the natural world – an element that recalls nostalgia in the Victorian era considering the extreme boosts in population and the rise of industry:

Go, for they call you, shepherd, from the hill;  
Go, shepherd, and untie the wattled cotes!  
No longer let the bawling fellows rack their throats,  
Nor the cropped herbage shoot another head. (ll. 1-5)

In this pastoral section of the piece, there is the idealization of nature, which is largely a Romantic notion that Arnold uses in his amalgamation of humanism and Victorian concerns. The first thirty lines of the poem continue with pastoral description before the speaker reveals the subject of the poem, the Utopian-like life of the Scholar-Gipsy. The story of the Oxford scholar turned vagabond gypsy in the pursuit of the power to control men’s minds is actually the secondary aspect of the poem; it is Arnold’s “dream” (l. 131) that holds the most importance. Arnold builds upon this story and the possibility of a life filled not only with knowledge, but also with the natural world, to explain its virtue to the reader. He praises the life of the Scholar-Gipsy, stating that the man is “Free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt, / Which much to have tried, in much been baffled, brings, / O life unlike to ours!” (164-6). Arnold expresses the opposition of “the fullness and vitality of nature and the deprivation and arid anxiety of modern man,” as “living nature in its complex wholeness [standing] for all that fretful man has lost – and is forever losing” (Stange 161). There is virtue in nature, and in humanity’s affinity with nature. Arnold continually examines the loss of this connection throughout the poem, and through his expression prompts the reader to desire this form of existence and feel the nostalgia for it. Arnold is not didactic in this poem, and he does not bluntly demand that the reader do anything. Instead, he focuses his modified humanism on showing the reader the way the world may once have been (although an idealized version of it), and delivers his message focusing more on delight than on strict instruction.

Wilde, however, departs from Carlyle’s stricter humanist writing and Arnold’s modified Victorian humanism, and he is one of the forerunners of the aestheticist and decadent movements, especially with *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Hoppers states, “Diametrically opposed to the moralistic view is aestheticism, the view that, instead of art (and everything else) being the handmaiden of morality, morality (and everything else) should be the handmaiden of art” (Para. 43). This definition boils down to the idea of “art for art’s sake,” where writers, or other artists, do not have the primary concern of teaching virtue or transmitting a moral message through their writing. Many of the

aestheticist authors “hold that the experience of art is the most intense and pervasive experience available in human life and that nothing should be allowed to interfere with it” (Hospers Para. 43). Aestheticism developed throughout the nineteenth-century, but with the rise of the decadent movement, which possessed the same goal as aestheticism, at the end of the nineteenth century, the aestheticism and decadence of authors such as Oscar Wilde became a popular literary tradition. In its avoidance of gritty realism and its revolt against the idea that art has to serve a social or moral purpose, aestheticism can become an avenue for escapism. If the search for meaning within an aestheticist or decadent text lies with the reader’s desire alone, and it is not a product of authorial intention, then those who wish to reject conventional Victorian morality and artistic philosophy can do so quite easily (especially compared to readers of works by authors like Carlyle). After almost a century of mainly Horatian literature that often demonized the current society, people may have had the desire to read clever literature that could appear to be “frivolous” despite Arnold’s condemnation of frivolity. The literature may not be, in fact, completely frivolous; it is not, however, as confrontational or overt in its message as literature earlier in the period, and it does not aspire to be. The experience of this literature lies with the readers, and “if the masses fail to appreciate it or receive the experience it has to offer, so much the worse for the masses” (Hospers Para. 43). In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde offers a reprieve as he does not use art as an instrument to highlight urban, industrial hardships, in opposition to Carlyle especially, with which a Victorian individual may be all too familiar.

On the surface, *The Importance of Being Earnest* seems to embody and vigorously showcase aestheticist principles. In the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde famously states, “All art is quite meaningless” (1828). About *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Nassaar states, “The play is absolutely devoid of sober content, and any attempt to find serious meaning in it must of necessity fall wide of the mark” (130). The premise of the play certainly shows a lack of seriousness in content, and the characters treat all serious matters (including divorce, disease, and death) as trivial aspects of human existence, while cucumber sandwiches and muffins are matters of great importance; for example, Algernon states that he is “greatly distressed...about there being no cucumbers” (1836). True “earnestness” is lacking as the characters lead double lives and continuously lie to avoid their responsibilities, while “Ernestness” is crucial to the future lives of Jack-Ernest, Algernon-Ernest, Cecily, and Gwendolen. As an aestheticist piece, “If it conflicts with morality, so much the worse for morality” (Hospers Para. 43), and Wilde neither shows the reader characters living successful, fulfilled, virtuous lives, nor does

he show a discontented existence for those who do not. Yet, as Nassaar states, “To say that the play has no serious meaning... is not to say that it has no meaning at all” (130). Similarly, while the subtitle of the play is a “trivial comedy for serious people,” Wilde plays more with the idea of the definitions of triviality than he expresses the actual sentiment that the play is entirely devoid of meaning. Oscar Wilde has broken ties with humanist literature designed to improve society in that he locates the meaning and value of art within the art itself and the creation of that art. Unlike Carlyle and Arnold who evaluate art based on its ability to teach and reflect accurately the outside world, Wilde subverts the philosophy that a social or moral message is a requirement of art, and writes in favor of the decadent style. For *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the focus lies on enjoying what one can in this society, and the play is trivial only when compared to a definition of meaningful like that of Carlyle or Arnold. Wilde, however, still examines the role of art within this transgressive, aestheticist context.

This examination of art emerges in the play in Act 1. Algernon tells Jack, “The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!” (1834) The humanist writers Carlyle and Arnold, and their Renaissance predecessors, seek to find what constitutes “true” virtue and then use their poetry to emulate it. Wilde, on the other hand, argues that no “truth” is actually pure; therefore, the task of Carlyle and Arnold is fruitless. Since no objective truth is attainable, and certainly not one that is “simple,” what is the point of humanist, Horatian literature? Aestheticist literature does not concern itself with the unattainable nature of absolute virtue; rather, it focuses on finding happiness with no required relationship to ethics. Similarly, aestheticist literature is only “meaningless” because it does not have one pure and simple truth. It can comment on numerous aspects of society without having an overarching purpose. This literature can show an immoral person receiving punishment or finding happiness, but it may not be because the author intends to condemn his crime or celebrate his success. Whereas Carlyle and Arnold make their purposes clear, Wilde does not feel the need to do so. Wilde even mocks the idea of assigning one social class (as does Carlyle) or one group of people, such as poets and critics (as does Arnold), to teach virtue to everyone else and to display meaning for others. Algernon states, “Lane’s views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don’t set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility” (1830). Wilde satirizes the humanist principle that one group should teach another, by placing that responsibility in the hands of the most unlikely class, certainly for the Victorian era, when the upper class (of which Wilde was a part) perceived

itself as far superior to lower classes. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a “private joke” (Nassaar 130) that may comment on Victorian society, but only to say that commenting does not necessitate change or produce virtue.

Oscar Wilde, with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, emerges with his aestheticism and decadence at the end of a period of British history characterized by change. The humanist principles that Matthew Arnold and Thomas Carlyle espoused disappeared by the end of the century in favor of Wilde’s aestheticism and decadence. This transition from the strict humanist and Horatian principles of using literature as a vehicle to teach virtue (usually to the lower classes) to the aesthetic principles of art for art’s sake mirrors the initial fight against industry to an almost acquiescence to a more machinated, modern society. Thomas Carlyle with *Past and Present*, Matthew Arnold with “Sweetness and Light,” and Oscar Wilde with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, trace this change throughout the Victorian Era.

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